

# WES CRAVEN'S NIGHTMARE



**I**n the cinema of Wes Craven, dreams can be very dangerous. "I get a lot of my ideas from dreams," he told me, "the scary ones that is." One of the scariest was about a chap named Freddy Krueger who came out of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to terrorise a bunch of terrified teens. "I took it around every major studio, for a period of three years but nobody wanted to know," he smiled. "They thought that nobody would be frightened by a dream, simply because they would know it was a

dream all along..." But of course *Nightmare* eventually got made and became a major hit, cementing Wes Craven's position as a modern day guru of gore.

He hardly looks the part. A quietly spoken individual in his mid 40s, short in stature and with a receding hairline, he seems more like a kindly schoolteacher, and thus it comes as little surprise to learn that he actually started his working life as a professor of humanities. "I used to make home movies for my own enjoyment, and as they got larger and larger so producers began to

Allan Bryce talks to Wes Craven,  
director of horror hit *A Nightmare on  
Elm Street* and the new Warner  
Home Video release  
*Deadly Friend*...

participate and I concluded that I'd much rather be making movies than teaching. So I quit my job and moved to New York, where I found employment as a messenger in a post-production house. Then one day somebody offered a small amount of money (\$90,000) to a friend of mine (Sean Cunningham, later director of *Friday the 13th*) and myself to shoot a small horror movie which I was to write and direct called *The Last House On The Left*."

Loosely based on Bergman's *Virgin Spring*, *Last House On The Left* was the grim story of two teenage girls who were raped and murdered by a gang of psychopaths. The latter end up at the parents' home, where they suffer appallingly for their crimes. It was an unrelenting nightmare of a movie that even now is still banned in this country and many others. "Wherever it played there were riots and protests, people fainting and even having heart attacks." Craven says his intention

was "to demythologise violence, making it less of an entertainment a-la Peckinpah, where it was shown in an almost glamorous balletic slow motion, and more like the real thing. We had the rule of never cutting away and never fading to black. *Last House* continued to watch as the violence went into its true nature. There was no precedent."

The film became a drive-in favourite in the States, but its success did nothing for Craven's career: "I became quite notorious in a negative way, and nobody would hire me to do anything else." And so he parted company with Cunningham to move to California, where in 1976 he managed to get the money together to film his second feature, another low budget shocker entitled *The Hills Have Eyes* (Palace). A violent fable about a family stranded in the desert and forced to do battle with a pack of cannibals, it won many awards and made a considerable amount of money at the box-office. It also made a star out of bald-headed giant Michael Berryman, who Craven cites as one of his favourite performers. "He's great looking, isn't he? I hired him because I'd seen him in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*





#### Greetings from a Deadly Friend

and a Claude Chabrol movie, and was really surprised how bright and talented a man he was under that grim exterior. Making *The Hills Have Eyes* out in the Mojave desert was a very tough experience for him, because he has a number of physical anomalies, one of which is that he has no sweat glands so he has to be very careful of heat and sunlight. We had to keep him under wraps when we weren't shooting."

*Hills* led to *Summer of Fear*, a Linda Blair telly movie, and the bigger budget chiller *Deadly Blessing* (Channel 5), which once more featured Michael Berryman as a menacing member of pop-eyed Ernest Borgnine's religious sect, this time putting the frighteners on farm girl Maren Jensen. This was most notable for a scary dream sequence where a big fat juicy spider plops into a girl's mouth! "We had some problems with the ending of that one," notes the director. "After the film was finished its producers decided it needed a splashier finish, so they gave us a lot more money to shoot a scene where the devil himself comes up through the floorboards to snatch the

heroine away. I didn't like it at all, but at that point in my career I was simply an employee. I had no

power to say yes or no." As it turned out the film was released in Britain minus this extra footage,

#### Director Wes Craven with Amanda Wyss in his upside down room



just as Craven wanted in the first place.

*Deadly Blessing* didn't do badly at the box-office, but his next two movies flopped dismally. *Swamp Thing* (Warner), a fable about a heroic walking vegetable designed 'for kids up to the age of 14 and adults who still like comic books' made very little money at all on its theatrical release, though it did become quite popular on video. And the much publicised *Hills Have Eyes 2* nosedived because of severe short-sightedness on the part of its producer: "It was born prematurely," states Craven with a shrug: "You see it was quite an ambitious script, but we were only given a minor budget to shoot it on so we had to rush, rush, rush. We planned to shoot a further five days, but the producer took the uncompleted film off to the L.A. film market and got such a good response that he decided to save the money and release it as it was!"

He had rather better luck with *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (CBS Fox Video), which became one of the biggest horror hits of all time, introducing screaming audiences to Freddy Krueger, child molester

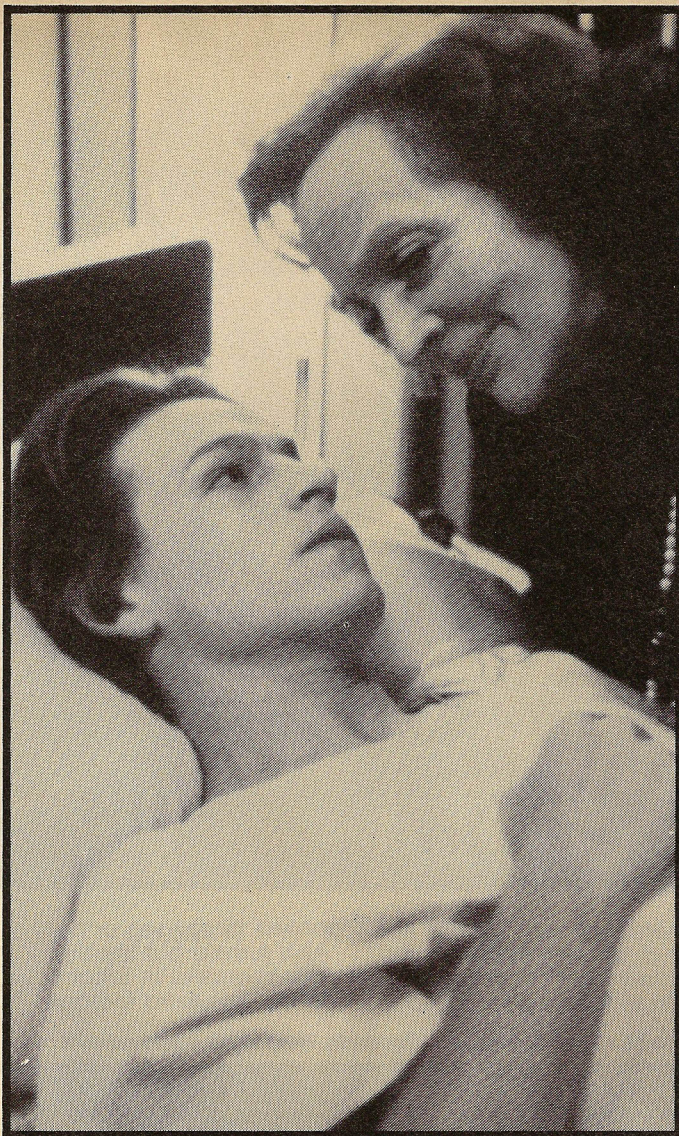


extraordinaire. The special effects scenes depicting Freddy's evil handiwork ate up most of the movie's \$1.8 million budget, but Craven says he got better value for money here than in any other film he has yet made: "Mainly because we had a very talented man named Jimmy Doyle on the crew who was a genius at doing a great deal with very little. The only thing that we really spent money on in *Elm Street* was the revolving room, and even on that we worked a deal where he absorbed half the cost because he got to keep it later. He's since used it on a couple of rock videos and the movie *Breakdance 2*."

With *Elm Street* breaking box-office records everywhere, Wes Craven was suddenly the hottest property in horror cinema. But when the expected sequel materialised — well telegraphed by the original's contrived surprise ending — he was off directing a series of episodes for *The Twilight Zone* television series. "I did seven of them in all, and I think they rank as my best work to date, particularly *Shatterday*, which was written by Harlan Ellison and was the first television appearance of Bruce Willis. I understand there's a cassette of some of them available in England." (CBS Fox Video).

So why wasn't he around to chronicle the further adventures of Freddy? "I wasn't terribly enthusiastic about the script for *Freddy's Revenge*" (Warner) he admits. "They hadn't elevated the concept to the next step. Freddy is most powerful in the shadows of somebody's dreams. If you put him in amongst a bunch of teens at a party then his impact is dissipated. I was very leery of him coming out like that and staying out. And I also thought there were several scenes that were totally meaningless. At one point the canary went crazy and exploded and the father explains it as the tap on the gas stove or something! I couldn't believe that were going to put that in the movie..."

*Deadly Friend* (just out on video from Warner) followed his *Twilight Zone* stint. It's a strange movie (written by Bruce Joel



Beatrice Straight watches Michael Beck defrost in *Chiller*

Rubin, author of the Christopher Walken sci-fi hit, *Brainstorm*) that starts out in Spielbergian fashion relating the adventures of bright as a button youngster Matthew Laborteaux and the robot playmate he has invented, and his growing affection for the cute girl next door (Kirsty Swanson). But about halfway through, the robot is destroyed, his girlfriend killed, and the movie leaps into *Elm Street* territory with heads being splattered like over-ripe melons and people being fed into incinerators to return as ghastly overcooked zombies.

Craven accepts that the film's lack of cohesion can probably be attributed to his own reputation: "Halfway through filming, Warners did some market research and found out that my name would really sell a horror movie. So they decided to spice up the movie a little with one or two fairly strong horror scenes. It turned

out to be not such a good idea. It lost us the kiddie audience, and in fact the fairly ridiculous scene where a basketball smashes Anne Ramsay's head off almost earned us an X-rating, which is the kiss of death in the States nowadays. It would probably have been a better movie without so much gore."

After *Deadly Friend*, Craven wrote and directed the telly movie *Chiller* (CBS Fox Video), then went back to Freddy Krueger country to co-script *Nightmare On Elm Street Part 3 — The Dream Warriors*. "I thought up a suitable sequel to the *Nightmare* concept: a group of kids who had the power to coalesce and fight Freddy on his own terms. And I took it to Bob Shaye at New Line who was very keen on the idea too. I'm quite pleased with the way the film turned out, and because of its success I'm certain they are going to

do a fourth. I believe it starts shooting early next year. I don't know what it's going to be about, but somebody said it may take the form of a prequel — *Freddy — The Early Years* perhaps?"

"I've just finished shooting my largest film to date, which at the moment is called *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. This is based on a non-fiction book written by a Harvard professor who was commissioned to go to Haiti and solve the mystery of zombies. It's quite real and quite scientific. Recently somebody was certified dead by an American doctor in an American hospital over there and he later showed up alive. It was absolutely authenticated for the first time in history. Beyond that the man was able to speak, which was unusual for a zombie! And he told of being poisoned and of being alive while in the grave."

"So this scientist, whose name was Wade Davis, made his way through the secret voodoo society and discovered a poisoner who was willing to show him how to make this poison that would go through a person's skin and make him appear to be dead and allow him to be buried and survive for a period of up to 12 hours, after which time the poisoners would dig him up and further process him with drugs until he had lost all volitional centres of his brain and was made into what we popularly term a zombie. The operative poison is called Tetrodotoxin and it's found in the organs of the Puffer fish."

The movie was shot on location in Haiti with an impressive cast top-lining black actor Paul Winfield and Britain's own Cicely (Mona Lisa) Tyson. "It's not a horror film," stresses Craven. "I prefer to call it a political terror film. It's a story of the politics of Haiti and the quest for this poisonous toxin; the conflict between the scientist and the leader of Haiti's secret police who is assigned to stop him leaving the country with it. We had some pretty hair raising experiences over there ourselves. One of our crew even got turned into a zombie!" Craven smiles: "I may just use him on my next movie."